

Coptic language

Coptic or **Coptic Egyptian** (Bohairic: ⲧⲙⲉⲧⲣⲉⲙ̀ⲛⲭⲙⲓ *timetremənkʰēmi* and Sahidic: ⲧⲙⲏ̀ⲧⲣⲙ̀ⲛⲕⲙⲉ *tməntṛəmənkēme*) is the latest stage of the Egyptian language, a northern Afro-Asiatic language that was developed during the Greco-Roman Egypt^[2] and was spoken until at least the 17th century.^[5] In the 2nd century BC, Egyptian began to be written in the Coptic alphabet, which is an adaptation of the Greek alphabet^[6] with the addition of six or seven signs from Demotic Egyptian to represent Afro-Asiatic sounds that the Greek language did not have.^[7]

Several distinct Coptic dialects are identified, the most prominent of which are *Sahidic*, originating in parts of Upper Egypt and *Bohairic*, originally from the western Nile Delta in Lower Egypt.

Coptic and Demotic are grammatically closely related to Late Egyptian, which was written with Egyptian hieroglyphs. Coptic flourished as a literary language from the 2nd to 13th centuries and its Bohairic dialect continues to be the liturgical language of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. It was supplanted by Egyptian Arabic as a spoken language toward the early modern period, but language revitalisation efforts have been underway since the 19th century.

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Coptic	
ⲧⲙⲉⲧⲣⲉⲙ̀ⲛⲭⲙⲓ ~ ⲧⲙⲏ̀ⲧⲣⲙ̀ⲛⲕⲙⲉ	
Native to	Egypt <div>Sudan (lesser extent)^[1]</div>
Era	Greco-Roman Egypt; ^{[2][3]} 2nd century BC – 17th century; survives as the liturgical language of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria and the Coptic Catholic Church
Language family	<div>Afro-Asiatic<ul style="list-style-type: none">Egyptian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Coptic</div>
Early forms	<div>Archaic Egyptian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Old Egyptian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Middle Egyptian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Late Egyptian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Demotic</div>
Writing system	Coptic alphabet
Language codes	
ISO 639-2	cop (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=95)
ISO 639-3	cop
Glottolog	copt1239 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/copt1239) ^[4]

Verbs

Verbal grade system

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Upper Egypt

Sahidic

Akhmimic

Lycopolitan

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Bohairic

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Oxyrhynchite

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Name

The native Coptic name for the language is **ⲧⲙⲉⲧⲣⲉⲙⲛⲭⲙⲓ** /tə-met-rem-ən-k^heː.mə/ in the Bohairic (Delta) dialect and **ⲧⲙⲛ̄ⲧⲣⲙⲛ̄ⲕⲙⲉ** /t(ə)-mənt-rem-ən-keː.mə/ in the Sahidic (Valley) dialect. The particle prefix *me(n)t-* from the verb **ⲙⲟⲩⲧ** *moudi* ('to speak') forms many abstract nouns in Coptic (not only those pertaining to "language"). The term *remənk^hēmi/rəmənkēme* meaning 'Egyptian', literally 'person of Egypt', is a compound of *rem-*, which is the construct state of the Coptic noun **ⲣⲱⲙⲓ/ⲣⲱⲙⲉ**, 'man, human being', + the genitive preposition **ⲛ̄** (ə)n- 'of' + the word for 'Egypt', **ⲭⲙⲓ/ⲕⲙⲉ** *k^hēmi/kēme* (cf. Kemet). Thus, the whole expression literally means 'language of the people of Egypt', or simply 'Egyptian language'.

Another name by which the language has been called is **ⲧⲙⲛ̄ⲧⲕⲩⲡⲧⲁⲓⲟⲛ** /təməntkuptaion/ from the Copto-Greek form **ⲧⲙⲛ̄ⲧⲁⲓⲕⲩⲡⲧⲓⲟⲛ** /təməntaigupton/ ('Egyptian language'). The term *logos ən aiguptios* ('Egyptian language') is also attested in Sahidic, but *logos* and *aiguptios* are both Greek in origin. In the liturgy of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the name is more officially **ⲧⲁⲥⲡⲓ ⲛ̄ⲣⲉⲙⲛⲭⲙⲓ** *tiaspi ənremənk^hēmi*, 'the Egyptian language', **ⲁⲥⲡⲓ** *aspi* being the Egyptian word for language.

Geographic distribution

Coptic is today spoken liturgically in the Coptic Orthodox and Coptic Catholic Church (along with Modern Standard Arabic). The language is spoken only in Egypt and historically has had little influence outside of the territory, except for monasteries located in Nubia. Coptic's most noticeable linguistic impact has been on the various dialects of Egyptian Arabic, which is characterised by a Coptic substratum in lexical, morphological, syntactical, and phonological features.^[8]

Influence on other languages

In addition to influencing the grammar, vocabulary and syntax of Egyptian Arabic, Coptic has lent to both Arabic and Modern Hebrew such words as:

- *timsāḥ*, Arabic: تمساح, Hebrew: תנין "crocodile"; ⲉⲙⲥⲁⲩ *emsah*; this subsequently entered Turkish as *timsah*. Coptic ⲉⲙⲥⲁⲩ is grammatically masculine and hence would have been vocalised *pemsah* or *bemsah* (Sahidic: ⲡⲉⲙⲥⲁⲩ; Bohairic: ⲡⲓⲉⲙⲥⲁⲩ). Hence it is unclear why the word should have entered Arabic with an initial *t*, which would have required the word to be grammatically feminine (i.e. Sahidic: *ⲧⲉⲙⲥⲁⲩ; Bohairic: *ⲧⲓⲉⲙⲥⲁⲩ).
- *tūbah* طوبة "brick"; Sahidic ⲧⲱⲱⲃⲉ *tōōbe*; Bohairic ⲧⲱⲃⲓ *tōbi*; this subsequently entered Catalan and Spanish (via Andalusian Arabic) as *tova* and *adobe* respectively, the latter of which was borrowed by American English.
- *wāḥah* واحة "oasis"; Sahidic ⲟⲩⲁⲩⲉ *ouahe*, Bohairic ⲟⲩⲉⲩⲓ *ouehi*; this subsequently entered Turkish as *vaha*

A few words of Coptic origin are found in the Greek language; some of the words were later lent to various European languages — such as *barge*, from Coptic ⲃⲁⲁⲣⲉ *baare*, "small boat".

However, most words of Egyptian origin that entered into Greek and subsequently into other European languages came directly from Ancient Egyptian, often Demotic. An example is the Greek ὄασις *oasis*, which comes directly from Egyptian *wḥꜣt* or demotic *wḥj*. However, Coptic reborrowed some words of Ancient Egyptian origin into its lexicon, via Greek. For example, both Sahidic and Bohairic use the word *ebenos*, which was taken directly from Greek ἔβεος "ebony", originally from Egyptian *hbnj*.

Many major cities' names in modern Egypt are Arabic adaptations of their former Coptic names:

- Tanta – ⲧⲁⲛⲧⲁⲑⲟ (*Tantat^ho*)
- Asyut – ⲥⲓⲟⲟⲩⲧ (*Sioout*)
- Faiyum – ⲫⲓⲟⲙ (*P^hiom*)
- Dumyat – ⲧⲁⲙⲓⲁⲧ (*Tamiati*)
- Aswan – ⲥⲟⲩⲁⲛ (*Souan*)
- Minya – ⲑⲙⲟⲛⲏ (*T^hmonē*)
- Damanhur – ⲧⲙⲓⲛⲩⲱⲣ (*Timinhōr*)

The Coptic name ΠΑΠΝΟΥΤΕ, *papnoute* (from Egyptian *pꜣy-pꜣ-n ꜥr*), means "belonging to God" or "he of God".^{[9][10][11]} It was adapted into Arabic as *Babnouda*, which remains a common name among Egyptian Copts to this day. It was also borrowed into Greek as the name Παφνούτιος (*Paphnutius*). That, in turn, is the source of the Russian name Пафнутий (*Pafnuty*), like the mathematician Pafnuty Chebyshev.

The Old Nubian language and the modern Nobiin language borrowed many words of Coptic origin.

History

The Egyptian language may have the longest documented history of any language, from Old Egyptian that appeared just before 3200 BC^[12] to its final phases as Coptic in the Middle Ages. Coptic belongs to the Later Egyptian phase, which started to be written in the New Kingdom of Egypt. Later Egyptian represented colloquial speech of the later periods. It had analytic features like definite and indefinite articles and periphrastic verb conjugation. Coptic, therefore, is a reference to both the most recent stage of Egyptian after Demotic and the new writing system that was adapted from the Greek alphabet.

Pre-Islamic period

The earliest attempts to write the Egyptian language using the Greek alphabet are Greek transcriptions of Egyptian proper names, most of which date to the Ptolemaic Kingdom. Scholars frequently refer to this phase as pre-Coptic. However, it is clear that by the Late Period of ancient Egypt, demotic scribes regularly employed a more phonetic orthography, a testament to the increasing cultural contact between Egyptians and Greeks even before Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt. Coptic itself, or Old Coptic, takes root in the first century. The transition from the older Egyptian scripts to the newly adapted Coptic alphabet was in part due to the decline of the traditional role played by the priestly class of ancient Egyptian religion, who, unlike most ordinary Egyptians, were literate in the temple scriptoria. Old Coptic is represented mostly by non-Christian texts such as Egyptian pagan prayers and magical and astrological papyri. Many of them served as glosses to original hieratic and demotic equivalents. The glosses may have been aimed at non-Egyptian speakers.



Fifth–sixth century Coptic liturgic inscription from Upper Egypt.

Under late Roman rule, Diocletian persecuted many Egyptian converts to the new Christian faith, which forced new converts to flee to the Egyptian deserts. In time, the growth of these communities generated the need to write Christian Greek instructions in the Egyptian language. The early Fathers of the Coptic Church, such as Anthony the Great, Pachomius the Great, Macarius of Egypt and Athanasius of Alexandria, who otherwise usually wrote in Greek, addressed some of their works to the Egyptian monks in Egyptian. The Egyptian language, now written in the Coptic alphabet, flourished in the second and third centuries. However, it was not until Shenoute that Coptic became a fully standardised literary language based on the Sahidic dialect. Shenouda's native Egyptian tongue and knowledge of Greek and rhetoric gave him the necessary tools to elevate Coptic, in content and style, to a literary height nearly equal to the position of the Egyptian language in ancient Egypt.

Islamic period

The Muslim conquest of Egypt by Arabs came with the spread of Islam in the seventh century. At the turn of the eighth century, Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan decreed that Arabic replace Koine Greek and Coptic as the sole administrative language. Literary Coptic gradually declined, and within a few hundred years, Egyptian bishop Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa' found it necessary to write his *History of the Patriarchs* in Arabic. However, ecclesiastically the language retained an important position, and many hagiographic texts were also composed during this period. Until the 10th century, Coptic remained the spoken language of the native population outside the capital.

Coptic is thought to have completely given way to Egyptian Arabic around the 13th century,^[13] though it may have survived in isolated pockets for a little longer. In the second half of the 19th century, Pope Cyril VI of Alexandria started a national Church-sponsored movement to revive Coptic. Several works of grammar were published, including a more comprehensive dictionary than had been formerly available. The scholarly findings of the field of Egyptology and the inauguration of the Institute of Coptic Studies further contributed to the renaissance. Efforts at language revitalisation continue to be undertaken, both inside and outside the Church, and have attracted the interest of Copts and linguists in and outside of Egypt. In a 2016 research in Turkey by KONDA Research and Consultancy, 0.01% of respondents claimed their native language to be Coptic (possibly confusing the words "kiptice" (Coptic language) and "kipçak" (Kipchak)).^[14]

Writing system

Coptic uses a writing system almost wholly derived from the Greek alphabet, with the addition of a number of letters that have their origins in Demotic Egyptian. This is comparable to the Latin-based Icelandic alphabet, which includes the runic letter thorn.^[15] There is some variation in the number and forms of these signs depending on the dialect. Some of the letters in the Coptic alphabet that are of Greek origin were normally reserved for words that are themselves Greek. Old Coptic texts employed several graphemes that were not retained in the literary Coptic orthography of later centuries.

In Sahidic, syllable boundary may have been marked by a supralinear stroke, or the stroke may have tied letters together in one word, since Coptic texts did not otherwise indicate word divisions. Some scribal traditions use a diaeresis over /i/ and /u/ at the beginning of a syllable or to mark a diphthong. Bohairic uses a superposed point or small stroke known as a *djinkim*.

Literature



Eighth century Coptic manuscript of Luke 5.5–9



Page from 19th century Coptic Language Grammar

The oldest Coptic writings date to the pre-Christian era (Old Coptic), though Coptic literature consists mostly of texts written by prominent saints of the Coptic Church such as Anthony the Great, Pachomius the Great and Shenoute. Shenoute helped fully standardise the Coptic language through his many sermons, treatises and homilies, which formed the basis of early Coptic literature.

Vocabulary

The core lexicon of Coptic is Egyptian, most closely related to the preceding Demotic phase of the language. Up to 40% of the vocabulary of literary Coptic is drawn from Greek, but borrowings are not always fully adapted to the Coptic phonological system and may have semantic differences as well. There are instances of Coptic texts having passages that are almost entirely composed from Greek lexical roots. However, that is likely due to the fact that the majority of Coptic religious texts are direct translations of Greek works.



Stone with Coptic inscription

What invariably attracts the attention of the reader of a Coptic text, especially if it is written in the Sa'idic dialect, is the very liberal use which is made of Greek loan words, of which so few, indeed, are to be found in the Ancient Egyptian language. There Greek loan words occur everywhere in Coptic literature, be it Biblical, liturgical, theological, or non-literary, i.e. legal documents and personal letters. Though nouns and verbs predominate, the Greek loan words may come from any other part of speech except pronouns.^[16]

Words or concepts for which no adequate Egyptian translation existed were taken directly from Greek to avoid altering the meaning of the religious message. In addition, other Egyptian words that would have adequately translated the Greek equivalents were not employed as they were perceived as having overt pagan associations. Old Coptic texts employ many such words, phrases and epithets; for example, the word $\tau\beta\alpha\iota\tau\omega\gamma$ '(Who is) in (His) Mountain', is an epithet of Anubis.^[17] There are also traces of some archaic grammatical features, such as residues of the Demotic relative clause, lack of an indefinite article and possessive use of suffixes.

Thus, the transition from the 'old' traditions to the new Christian religion also contributed to the adoption of Greek words into the Coptic religious lexicon. It is safe to assume that the everyday speech of the native population retained, to a greater extent, its indigenous Egyptian character, which is sometimes reflected in Coptic nonreligious documents such as letters and contracts.

Phonology

Coptic provides the clearest indication of Later Egyptian phonology from its writing system, which fully indicates vowel sounds and occasionally stress pattern. The phonological system of Later Egyptian is also better known than that of the Classical phase of the language because of a greater number of sources indicating Egyptian sounds, including cuneiform letters containing transcriptions of Egyptian words and phrases, and Egyptian renderings of Northwest Semitic names. Coptic sounds, in addition, are known from a variety of Coptic-Arabic papyri in which Arabic letters were used to transcribe Coptic and vice versa. They date to the medieval Islamic period, when Coptic was still spoken.^[18]

Vowels

There are some differences of opinion among Coptic language scholars on the correct phonetic interpretation of the writing system of Coptic. Differences centre on how to interpret the pairs of letters ε/η and o/ω. In the Attic dialect of Ancient Greek in the 5th century BC, the first member of each pair is a short closed vowel /e, o/, and the second member is a long open vowel /εː, οː/. In some interpretations of Coptic phonology,^[19] it is assumed that the length difference is primary, with ε/η e/eː and o/ω o/oː. Other scholars^{[20][21]} argue for a different analysis in which ε/η and o/ω are interpreted as e/ε and o/ο.

These two charts show the two theories of Coptic vowel phonology:

Monophthong phonemes (length theory)

	<u>Front</u>	<u>Central</u>	<u>Back</u>
<u>Close</u>	iː		uː
<u>Close-mid</u>	eː e		oː o
<u>Mid</u>		ə	
<u>Open</u>			ɑ

Monophthong phonemes (vowel quality theory)

	<u>Front</u>	<u>Central</u>	<u>Back</u>
<u>Close</u>	iː		uː
<u>Close-mid</u>	e		o
<u>Mid</u>	ε	ə	ο
<u>Open</u>			ɑ

Dialects vary in their realisation. The difference between [o] and [u] seems to be allophonic. Evidence is not sufficient to demonstrate that these are distinct vowels, and if they are, the difference has a very low functional load. For dialects that use orthographic <ει> for a single vowel, there appears to be no phonetic difference from <ι>.

Double orthographic vowels are presumed here to be long, as that makes the morphology more straightforward. (Another common interpretation is that these represented glottal stop.)

Akhmimic is conservative, close to what is reconstructed for Old Coptic.

Akhmimic stressed vowels

	<u>Front</u>	<u>Back</u>
<u>Close</u>	i, iː <ι-ει, ιει>	u~o, uː~oː <ου~ω, ουου>
<u>Mid</u>	e <η>	
	ε, εː <ε, εε>	οː <οο~ωω>
<u>Open</u>	a, aː <α, αα>	

There is no length distinction in final stressed position, but only those vowels that occur long appear there: <(ε)ι, ε, α, o~ω, ου>.

In Sahidic, the letter ε was used for short /e/ before back fricatives, and also for unstressed schwa. It's possible there was also a distinction between short /ε/ and /a/, but if so the functional load was extremely low.

Sahidic stressed vowels

	<u>Front</u>	<u>Back</u>
<u>Close</u>	i <ι~ει>	u~o, oː <ου~ω, ωω>
<u>Mid</u>	e, eː <η~ε, ηη>	
	<ε>?, εː <εε>	ɔ, ɔː <ο, οο>
<u>Open</u>	a, aː <α, αα>	

Again, length is neutralised in final stressed position: <(ε)ι, η, ε, α, ο, ω~ου>.

Bohairic did not have long vowels. /i/ was only written <ι>. As above, it's possible that /u/ and /o/ were distinct vowels rather than just allophones.

Bohairic stressed vowels

	<u>Front</u>	<u>Back</u>
<u>Close</u>	i <ι>	u~o <ου~ω>
<u>Mid</u>	e <η>	
	ε <ε>	ɔ <ο>
<u>Open</u>	a <α>	

In Late Coptic (that is, Late Bohairic), the vowels were reduced to those found in Egyptian Arabic, /a, i, u/. <ω, o> became /u/, <εε> became /a/, and <η> became either /i/ or /a/. It's difficult to explain <η>. However, it generally became /a/ in stressed monosyllables, /i/ in unstressed monosyllables, and in polysyllables, /a/ when followed by /i/, and /i/ when not.

There were no doubled orthographic vowels in Mesokemic. Some representative correspondences with Sahidic are:

Sahidic stressed vowels	α	αα, εε	η	ο	ω	ωω
Mesokemic equivalent	ε	η	η	α	ο	ω

It's not clear if these correspondences reflect distinct pronunciations in Mesokemic, or if they're an imitation of the long Greek vowels <η, ω>.

Consonants

As with the vowels, there are differences of opinion over the correct interpretation of the Coptic consonant letters, particular the letters Ⲭ and Ⲫ. Ⲭ is transcribed as <j> in many older Coptic sources and Ⲫ as <g>^[19] or <č>. [Lambdin \(1983\)](#) notes that the current conventional pronunciations are different from the probable ancient pronunciations: Sahidic Ⲭ was probably pronounced [tʲ] and Ⲫ was probably pronounced [kʲ]. [Reintges \(2004, p. 22\)](#) suggests that Ⲭ was pronounced [tʃ].

Beside being found in Greek loanwords, the letters ⟨ϕ, θ, χ⟩ were used in native words for a sequence of /p, t, k/ plus /h/, as in **ΘΕ** = **Τ-ΘΕ** "the-way" (f.sg.) and **ΦΟϚ** = **Π-ΘΟϚ** "the-snake" (m.sg). The letters did not have this use in Bohairic, which used them for single sounds.

Coptic consonant phonemes

		<u>Labial</u>	<u>Alveolar</u>	<u>Palatal</u>	<u>Velar</u>		<u>Glottal</u>
					<u>palatalized</u>	<u>plain</u>	
<u>Nasal</u>		<u>m</u>	<u>n</u>			<u>ŋ</u> ^[a]	
<u>Plosive/ affricate</u>	<u>aspirate</u> ^[b]	<u>p</u> ^h ^[c]	<u>t</u> ^h ^[d]	<u>tʃ</u> ^h ^[e]		<u>k</u> ^h ^[f]	
	<u>tenuis</u>	<u>p</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>tʃ</u> ^[g]	<u>k</u> ^j ^[h]	<u>k</u>	
<u>Fricative</u>	<u>voiceless</u>	<u>f</u> ^[i]	<u>s</u>	<u>ʃ</u>	<u>x</u> ^j ^[j]	<u>x</u> ^[k]	<u>h</u> ^[l]
	<u>voiced</u>	<u>β</u> ^[m]					
<u>Approximant</u>			<u>l</u>	<u>j</u> ^[n]		<u>w</u> ^[o]	
<u>Tap</u>			<u>r</u>				

- a. /ŋ/ occurs only in Sahidic, where it is written ⟨nr⟩ and corresponds to a word-final /nk/ cluster in all other dialects.^[22]
- b. The aspirate series is preserved only in Bohairic when preceding a stressed vowel. It merges with the tenuis series in all other dialects.^[23]
- c. /p^h/ is written ⟨Φ⟩ in Bohairic. In all other dialects ⟨Φ⟩ represents the cluster /ph/.^{[24][25]}
- d. /t^h/ is written ⟨Θ⟩ in Bohairic. In all other dialects ⟨Θ⟩ represents the cluster /th/.^{[24][25]}
- e. Bohairic /tʃ^h/ is written ⟨Ϯ⟩ and derives from a merger between Egyptian t̥ and instances of Egyptian k affected by palatalization.
- f. /k^h/ is written ⟨X⟩ in Bohairic. In all other dialects ⟨X⟩ represents the cluster /kh/.^{[24][25]}
- g. /tʃ/ is written ⟨Ξ⟩ in all dialects. Bohairic /tʃ/ derives from a merger between Egyptian d̥ and instances of Egyptian g and q affected by palatalization. In all other dialects /tʃ/ derives from a merger between Egyptian d̥ and t̥.
- h. In dialects other than Bohairic, /kʲ/ is written ⟨Ϯ⟩ and derives from instances of Egyptian k, g, and q affected by palatalization.^[25]
- i. Historical alternation with /β/ suggests an original value of [ϕ].^[26]
- j. /xʲ/ is distinguished only in Old Coptic and Dialect P, where it is written ⟨ϣ̄⟩ and ⟨ϣ⟩ respectively.^[27] It corresponds to Akhmimic /x/ and /ʃ/ in all other dialects.^[28]
- k. /x/ is preserved in Akhmimic, where it is written ⟨ϣ̄⟩, and in Bohairic and Dialect P, where it is written ⟨ϣ⟩. It merges with /h/ in all other dialects.^[29]
- l. /h/ is written ⟨ϣ̄⟩ in all dialects.
- m. A word-final allophone [b] occurs in Bohairic.^[30]
- n. /j/ is written ⟨ι⟩ ~ ⟨ει⟩ in all dialects.
- o. /w/ is written ⟨οϣ̄⟩ (rarely ⟨ϣ̄⟩) in all dialects.

It is possible that in addition there was a glottal stop, ʔ, that was not consistently written. Coptic does not seem to have had a glottal stop at the beginning of orthographically vowel-initial words. It's possible that vowels written double were an attempt to indicate glottal stop, rather than a long vowel, in the middle of a word. However, there is little evidence for this (e.g., Arabic loans with short vowels and glottal stop are not written with double vowels in Coptic, and Coptic words with double orthographic vowels are transcribed with long vowels rather than hamza in Arabic.)

In Late Coptic (ca. 14th century), Bohairic sounds that did not occur in Egyptian Arabic were lost. A possible shift from a tenuis-aspirate distinction to voiced-tenuis is only attested from the alveolars, the only place that Arabic has such a contrast.

Late Coptic consonants

Original pronunciation	Late pronunciation
β	w (final [b])
p	b
p ^h	b ~ f
t	d (final [t])
t ^h	t
c	ʃ ^[31]
c ^h	ʃ
k	k
k ^h	k

Earlier phases of Egyptian may have contrasted voiceless and voiced bilabial plosives, but the distinction seems to have been lost. Late Egyptian, Demotic and Coptic all interchangeably use their respective graphemes to indicate either sound; for example, Coptic for 'iron' appears alternately as ΠΕΝΙΠΕ, ΒΕΝΙΠΕ and ΒΙΝΙΒΕ. That probably reflects dialect variation. Both letters were interchanged with ϕ and ϣ to indicate /f/, and Β was also used in many texts to indicate the bilabial approximant /w/. Coptologists believe that Coptic Β was articulated as a voiced bilabial fricative [β]. In the present-day Coptic Church services, this letter is realised as /v/, but it is almost certainly a result of the pronunciation reforms instituted in the 19th century.

Whereas Old Egyptian contrasts /s/ and /z/, the two sounds appear to be in free variation in Coptic, as they were since the Middle Egyptian period. However, they are contrasted only in Greek loans; for example, native Coptic ΔΝΖΗΒΕ (*anzībə*) and ΔΝΧΗΒΕ (*ansībə*) 'school' are homophonous. Other consonants that sometimes appear to be either in free variation or to have different distributions across dialects are [t] and [d], [r] and [l] (especially in the Fayyumic dialect, a feature of earlier Egyptian) and [k] and [g], with the voiceless stop consonants being more common in Coptic words and the voiced ones in Greek borrowings. Apart from the liquid consonants, this pattern may indicate a sound change in Later Egyptian, leading to a neutralisation of voiced alveolar and velar plosives. When the voiced plosives are realised, it is usually the result of consonant voicing in proximity to /n/.

Though there is no clear evidence that Coptic had a glottal stop, different orthographic means have been posited for indicating one by those who believe that it did: with Δ word-initially, with Ι word-finally in monosyllabic words in northern dialects and Ε in monosyllabic words in Akhmimic and Assiutic, by reduplication of a vowel's grapheme but mostly unwritten.

A few early manuscripts have a letter ϣ or ϣ̣ ϣ where Sahidic and Bohairic have ϣ̣ ʃ. and Akhmimic has ϣ̣ x. This sound seems to have been lost early on.

Grammar

Coptic is agglutinative with subject–verb–object word order but can be verb–subject–object with the correct preposition in front of the subject. Number, gender, tense, and mood are indicated by prefixes that come from Late Egyptian. The earlier phases of Egyptian did this through suffixation. Some vestiges of the suffix inflection survive in Coptic, mainly to indicate inalienable possession and in some verbs. Compare the Middle Egyptian form **satāpafa* 'he chooses' (written *stp.f* in hieroglyphs) to Coptic (Sahidic) *f.sotp* *ϣϣⲱⲧⲡ* 'he chooses'.

Nouns

All Coptic nouns carry grammatical gender, either masculine or feminine, usually marked through a prefixed definite article as in the Romance languages. Masculine nouns are marked with the article /pə, peː/ and feminine nouns with the article /tə, teː/ ^[32] in the Sahidic dialect and /pi, əp/ and /ti, ət/ in the Bohairic dialect.

Bohairic: *ⲡⲓⲣⲱⲙⲓ* /pəˈrɔːmə/ - 'the man' / *ⲧⲁⲓⲁ* /təˈtʃiːtʃ/ - 'the hand'

Sahidic: *ⲡⲉⲣⲱⲙⲉ* /pəˈrɔːmə/ - 'the man' / *ⲧⲉⲓⲁ* /təˈtʃiːtʃ/ - 'the hand'

The definite and indefinite articles also indicate number; however, only definite articles mark gender. Coptic has a number of broken plurals, a vestige of Older Egyptian, but in the majority of cases, the article marks number. Generally, nouns inflected for plurality end in /wə/, but there are some irregularities. The dual was another feature of earlier Egyptian that survives in Coptic in only few words, such as *ϣⲛⲁⲩ* (*snaui*) 'two'.

Words of Greek origin keep their original grammatical gender, except for neuter nouns, which become masculine in Coptic.

Pronouns

Coptic pronouns are of two kinds, dependent and independent. Independent pronouns are used when the pronoun is acting as the subject of a sentence, as the object of a verb, or with a preposition. Dependent pronouns are a series of prefixes and suffixes that can attach to verbs and other nouns. Coptic verbs can therefore be said to inflect for the person, number and gender of the subject and the object: a pronominal prefix marks the subject, and a pronominal suffix marks the object, e.g. "I have the ball." When (as in this case) the subject is a pronoun, it normally isn't also expressed independently, unless for emphasis.

As in other Afroasiatic languages, gender of pronouns differ only in the second and third person singular. The following table shows the pronouns of the Sahidian dialect:

		Independent		Proclitic	As suffix
		Stressed	Unstressed		
Singular	1.	ⲁⲛⲟⲕ anok	ⲁⲛⲕ- anək-	ⲧ- ti-	ⲥⲓ =i
	2. m.	ⲛⲟⲕ ənt ^h ok	ⲛⲧⲉⲕ- əntek-	ⲕ- ək-	ⲥⲕ =k
	2. f.	ⲛⲟ ənt ^h o	ⲛⲧⲉ- ənte-	ⲧⲉ- ⲧⲣ- te-, tr-	ⲥⲉ ⲥⲣ ⲥⲡ ⲥⲣⲉ ⲥⲧⲉ =Ø, =e, =r(e), =te
	3. m.	ⲛⲟⲟϥ ənt ^h of		ϥ- əf-	ⲥϥ =f
	3. f.	ⲛⲟⲟⲥ ənt ^h os		ⲥ- əs-	ⲥⲥ =s
Plural	1.	ⲁⲛⲟⲛ anon	ⲁⲛ- an-	ⲧⲉⲛ- ten-	ⲥⲛ =n
	2.	ⲛⲟⲱⲧⲉⲛ ənt ^h ōten	ⲛⲧⲉⲛ- ənten-	ⲧⲉⲧⲉⲛ- teten-	ⲥⲧⲉⲛ ⲥⲧⲉⲧⲉⲛ =ten, =teten
	3.	ⲛⲟⲱⲟϥ ənt ^h ōou		ⲥⲉ- se-	ⲥⲟϥ =ou

Adjectives

Most Coptic adjectives are actually nouns that have the attributive particle *n* to make them adjectival. In all stages of Egyptian, this morpheme is also used to express the genitive; for example, the Bohairic word for 'Egyptian', **ⲣⲉⲙⲛⲭⲏⲙⲓ** /remən^heːmə/, is a combination of the nominal prefix **ⲣⲉⲙ-** *rem-* (the reduced form of **ⲣⲱⲙⲓ** *rōmi* 'man'), followed by the genitive morpheme **ⲛ** *ən* ('of') and finally the word for Egypt, **ⲭⲏⲙⲓ** *k^hēmi*.

Verbs

Verbal grade system

Coptic, like Ancient Egyptian and Semitic languages, has root-and-pattern or templatic morphology, and the basic meaning of a verb is contained in a root and various derived forms of root are obtained by varying the vowel pattern. For example, the root for 'build' is *kt*. It has four derived forms: **ⲕⲟⲧ** *kɔt* (the absolute state grade); **ⲕⲉⲧ-** *ket-* (the nominal state grade), **ⲕⲟⲧⲥ** *kot=* (the pronominal state grade), and **ⲕⲉⲧ** *kɛt* (the stative grade). (The nominal state grade is also called the construct state in some grammars of Coptic.)

The absolute, nominal, and pronominal state grades are used in different syntactic contexts. The absolute state grade of a transitive verb is used before a direct object with the accusative preposition /əⁿ, ə^m/, and the nominal state grade is used before a direct object with no case-marking. The pronominal state grade is used before a pronominal direct object enclitic. In addition, many verbs also have a neutral state grade, used to express a state resulting from the action of the verb. Compare the following forms:^[33]

Absolute state grade

ⲁⲓⲛⲓⲙⲓ ⲙ̀ⲡⲁⲓⲱⲧ - *Aijimi əmpaiōt*

ⲁⲓⲛⲓⲙⲓ

a-i-jimi

PEV-1SG-find.ABS

'I found my father.'

ⲙ̀ⲡⲁⲓⲱⲧ

əm-p-a-iōt

PREP-DEF-MASC-SG-1SG-father

Nominal state grade

ⲁⲓⲛⲉⲙ ⲡⲁⲓⲱⲧ - *Aijem paiōt*

ⲁⲓⲛⲉⲙ

a-i-jem

PEV-1SG-find.NOM

'I found my father.'

ⲡⲁⲓⲱⲧ

p-a-iōt

DEF-MASC-SG-1SG-father

Pronominal state grade

ⲁⲓⲟ̀ⲉⲛⲧⲥⲓ - *Aijəntf*

ⲁⲓⲟ̀ⲉⲛⲧⲥⲓ

a-i-jənt=f

PEV-1SG-find.PRONOM=3MSG

'I found him.'

For most transitive verbs, both absolute and nominal state grade verbs are available for non-pronominal objects. However, there is one important restriction, known as *Jernstedt's rule* (or the *Stern-Jernstedt rule*) (Jernstedt 1927): present-tense sentences cannot be used in the nominal state grade. Thus sentences in the present tense always show a pattern like the first example above (absolute state), never the second pattern (nominal state).

In general, the four grades of Coptic verb are not predictable from the root, and are listed in the lexicon for each verb. The following chart shows some typical patterns of correspondence:

Gloss	Absolute state		Nominal state		Pronominal state		Neutral state	
Spread	ⲡⲱⲣⲱ	po:rəʃ	ⲡⲣⲱ	pərʃ	ⲡⲱⲣⲱ	po:rʃ	ⲡⲱⲣⲱ	poʔrəʃ
Dig	ⲱⲓⲕⲉ	ʃi:kə	ⲱⲉⲕⲧ	ʃekt	ⲱⲁⲕⲧ	ʃakt	ⲱⲟⲕⲉ	ʃoʔkə
Comfort	ⲥⲟⲗⲥⲗ	solsəl	ⲥⲗⲥⲗ	səlsəl	ⲥⲗⲥⲱⲗ	səlso:l	ⲥⲗⲥⲱⲗ	səlso:l
Roll	ⲥⲕⲟⲣⲕⲣ	skorkər	ⲥⲕⲣ̅ⲕⲣ	skərkər	ⲥⲕⲣ̅ⲕⲱⲣ	skərko:r	ⲥⲕⲣ̅ⲕⲱⲣ	skərko:r
Build	ⲕⲱⲧ	ko:t	ⲕⲉⲧ	ket	ⲕⲱⲧ	kot	ⲕⲙⲧ	ke:t

It is hazardous to make firm generalisations about the relationships between these grade forms, but the nominal state is usually shorter than the corresponding absolute and neutral forms. Absolute and neutral state forms are usually bisyllabic or contain a long vowel; the corresponding nominal state forms are monosyllabic or have short vowels.

Tense/aspect/mood inflection

Coptic has a very large number of distinct tense-aspect-mood categories, expressed by particles which are either before the verb or before the subject. The future I /na/ is a preverbal particle and follows the subject.^[34]

ΠΕΧΟΕΙC ΝΑΚΡΙΝΕ ÑÑΕΛΛΑΟC - *Pecoeis nakrine ənnelaos*

ΠΕΧΟΕΙC

Pe-coeis

DEF:MASC:SG-lord

'The lord will judge the nations.'

ΝΑΚΡΙΝΕ

na-krine

FUT-judge

ÑÑΕΛΛΑΟC

ən-ne-laos

PREP-DEF:PL-people

In contrast, the perfective /a/ is a pre-subject particle:

λ ΤΕΦΩΝΕ ΔΕ ΟΛ ÑÑΕΦΚΗC - *A tefsōne de ol ənnefkēs*

λ

A

PEV

ΟΛ

ol

carry.ABS

'His sister carried his bones.'

ΤΕΦΩΝΕ

te-f-sōne

DEF:F:SG-3MSG-sister

ÑÑΕΦΚΗC

ən-ne-f-kēs

PREP-DEF:PL-3MSG-bone

ΔΕ

de

PART

There is some variation in the labels for the tense/aspect/mood categories. The chart below shows the labels from Reintges (2004), Lambdin (1983), Plumley (1948). (Where they agree, only one label is shown.) Each form lists the morphology found with a nonpronominal subject (Marked with an underscore in Coptic) and a third person singular masculine pronominal subject ('he'):

Tense name			Nominal subject		3rd M. Sg. Pronominal subject	
Reintges	Lambdin	Plumley				
First Present		Present I	—	NP	q-	f-
Second Present			ερε _	ere NP	εq-	ef-
Relative of First Present			ετερε _	etere NP	ετq̇-	etəf-
Circumstantial			ερε _	ere NP	εq-	ef-
Preterite Present	Imperfect	Imperfect	νερε _	nere NP	νεq-	nef-
Preterite Past			νεα _	nea NP	νεαq-	neaf-
Future I			_ να-	NP na-	qνα-	fna-
Future II			ερε _ να-	ere NP na-	εqνα-	efna-
Future III			ερε _	ere NP	εqε-	efe-
	Negative Future III	Negative Future II	ἵνε _	ənne NP	ἵνεq-	ənnef-
	Imperfect of Future	Future Imperfec	νερε _ να-	nere NP na-	νεqνα-	nefna-
Perfect I			α _	a NP	αq-	af-
Negative Perfect I			ἄπε _	əmpε NP	ἄπεq-	əmpref-
Perfect II			ἵτε _	ənta NP	ἵτεq-	əntaf-
Habitual			ωαρε _	ʃare NP	ωαq-	ʃaf-
Habitual I			εωαρε _	eʃare NP	εωαq-	eʃaf-
Negative Habitual			μερε _	mere NP	μεq-	mef-
<u>Jussive</u>	<u>Injunctive</u>	<u>Optative</u>	μαρε _	mare NP	μαρεq-	maref-
Conditional			ερωαν _	erʃan NP	ερωαν-	erʃan-
Conjunctive			ἵτε _	ənte NP	νq̇-	nəf-
Inferential	Future Conjunctive of Result	Future I	ταρε _	tare NP	ταρεq-	taref-
Temporal			ἵτερε _	əntere NP	ἵτερεq-	ənteref-
Terminative	"Until"	"Unfulfilled action"	ωαντε _	ʃante NP	ωαντq̇-	ʃantəf-
	"Not yet"	"Unfulfilled action"	ἄπατε _	əmpate NP	ἄπατq̇-	əmpatəf-

An approximate range of use for most of the tense/aspect/mood categories is shown in the following table:

Tense name (Lambdin)	Approximate range of use
Present I	Present time in narrative (predicate focus)
Relative of Present I	Non-subject relative clause in present tense
Circumstantial	Background clauses; relative clauses with indefinite heads
Imperfect	Action in progress in the past
Future I	Simple future tense (predicate focus)
Future II	Simple future tense (adverbial focus)
Future III	Future tense conveyed as necessary, inevitable, or obligatory
Perfect I	Primary narrative tense (predicate focus)
Negative Perfect I	Negative of Perfect I
Perfect II	Primary narrative tense (adverbial focus); relative clause form of Perfect I
Habitual	Characteristic or habitual action
Negative Habitual	Negative of Habitual
Injunctive	Imperative for first and third persons ('let me', 'let him', etc.)
Conditional	Protasis (if-clause) of a conditional (if-then) statement
Conjunctive	Event shares the TAM of a preceding initial verb
Future Conjunctive of Result	Used in clauses that express a resultant action
Temporal	Past action in a subordinate temporal clause ("when NP V-ed, ...")

Second tenses

An unusual feature of Coptic is the extensive use of a set of "second tenses", which are required in certain syntactic contexts. "Second tenses" are also called "relative tenses" in some work.^[7]

Prepositions

Coptic has prepositions, rather than postpositions:

ⲉⲓ ⲡⲓⲟⲓ - *hi p-joi*

ⲉⲓ	ⲡⲓⲟⲓ
<i>hi</i>	<i>p-joi</i>
on	DEF:M:SG-ship
'on the ship'	

Pronominal objects of prepositions are indicated with enclitic pronouns:

ⲉⲣⲟⲕ - *ero=k*

ⲉⲣⲟⲕ
erok
 on-2MSG
 'to you'

ΝΑΝ - *na=n*

ΝΑΝ
nan
for-1_{PL}
'for us'

Many prepositions have different forms before the enclitic pronouns.^[35] Compare

ἒΠΧΟΙ - *e-p-joi*

ἒΠΧΟΙ
e-p-joi
to-DEF:SG:M-ship
'to the ship'

ΕΡΟϞ - *ero=f*

ΕΡΟϞ
erof
on-3_{MSG}
'to him'

Syntax

Sentential syntax

Coptic typically shows subject–verb–object (SVO) word order, as in the following examples:^[36]

λ ΤΕΒΑΜΑΥΛΕ ΜΙΣΕ ΝΟΥΨΗΡΕ ΝΨΙΜΕ - *A tecamaule mise ənoušēre ənšime*

λ <i>A</i> PEV	ΤΕΒΑΜΑΥΛΕ <i>te-camaule</i> DEF:F:SG-camel	ΜΙΣΕ <i>mise</i> deliver.ABS
ΝΟΥΨΗΡΕ <i>ən-ou-šēre</i> PREP-INDEF:SG-girl	ΝΨΙΜΕ <i>ən-šime</i> link-woman	
'The she-camel delivered a daughter.'		

ΠΕΧΟΕΙC ΝΑΚΡΙΝΕ ΝΝΕΛΑΟC - *Pecoeis nakrine ənnelaos*

ΠΕΧΟΕΙC <i>Pe-coeis</i> DEF:M:SG-lord	ΝΑΚΡΙΝΕ <i>na-krine</i> FUT-judge	ΝΝΕΛΑΟC <i>ən-ne-laos</i> PREP-DEF:PL-people
'The Lord will judge the people.'		

ΔΙΘΙΝΕ ἈΠΑΕΙΩΤ - *Aicine ətpaeiōt*

ΔΙΘΙΝΕ

A-i-cine

PEV-1SG-find.ABS

'I found my father.'

ἄΠΑΙΩΤ

əp-p-a-eiōt

PREP-DEF:MASC:SG-1SG-father

The verbs in these sentences are in the *absolute state grade*,^[37] which requires that its direct object be introduced with the preposition /ən, əm/. This preposition functions like accusative case.

There is also an alternative *nominal state grade* of the verb in which the direct object of the verb follows with no preposition:

ΔΙΘΕΝ ΠΑΙΩΤ - Aicen paeiōt

ΔΙΘΕΝ

a-i-cen

PEV-1SG-find.NOM

'I found my father.'

ΠΑΙΩΤ

p-a-eiōt

DEF:M:SG-1SG-father

Dialects



Sandstone stela, inscribed with Coptic text. The names Phoibammon and Abraham appear. From Egypt, find spot unknown, date known. The British Museum, London



Coptic and Arabic inscriptions in an Old Cairo church

There is little written evidence of dialectal differences in the pre-Coptic phases of the Egyptian language due to the centralised nature of the political and cultural institutions of ancient Egyptian society. However, literary Old and Middle (Classical) Egyptian represent the spoken dialect of Lower Egypt around the city of Memphis, the capital of Egypt in the Old Kingdom. Later Egyptian is more representative of the dialects spoken in Upper Egypt, especially around the area of Thebes as it became the cultural and religious center of the New Kingdom.

Coptic more obviously displays a number of regional dialects that were in use from the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in northern Egypt, south into Nubia, and in the western oases. However, while many of these dialects reflect actual regional linguistic (namely phonological and some lexical) variation, they mostly reflect localised orthographic traditions with very little grammatical differences.

Upper Egypt

Sahidic

Sahidic (also known as **Thebaic**) is the dialect in which most known Coptic texts are written, and was the leading dialect in the pre-Islamic period. It is thought to have originally been a regional dialect from the area around Hermopolis (Coptic **Ⲭⲙⲟⲩⲛⲉⲓⲛ** *Shmounein*). Around 300 it began to be written in literary form, including translations of major portions of the Bible (see Coptic versions of the Bible). By the 6th century, a standardised spelling had been attained throughout Egypt. Almost all native authors wrote in this dialect of Coptic. Sahidic was, beginning in the 9th century, challenged by Bohairic, but is attested as late as the 14th.

While texts in other Coptic dialects are primarily translations of Greek literary and religious texts, Sahidic is the only dialect with a considerable body of original literature and non-literary texts. Because Sahidic shares most of its features with other dialects of Coptic with few peculiarities specific to itself, and has an extensive corpus of known texts, it is generally the dialect studied by learners of Coptic, particularly by scholars outside of the Coptic Church.



Shred of a pottery vessel inscribed with 5 lines, Coptic Sahidic language. Byzantine period, 6th century AD. From Thebes, Egypt. The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, London

Akhmimic

Akhmimic was the dialect of the area around the town of Akhmim (Greek *Panopolis*). It flourished during the fourth and fifth centuries, after which no writings are attested. Akhmimic is phonologically the most archaic of the Coptic dialects. One characteristic feature is the retention of the phoneme /x/, which is realised as /ʃ/ in most other dialects. Similarly, it uses an exceptionally conservative writing system strikingly similar to Old Coptic.

Lycopolitan

Lycopolitan (also known as **Subakhmimic** and **Assiutic**) is a dialect closely related to Akhmimic in terms of when and where it was attested, but manuscripts written in Lycopolitan tend to be from the area of Asyut. The main differences between the two dialects seem to be graphic in nature. The Lycopolitan variety was used extensively for translations of Gnostic and Manichaean works, including the texts of the Nag Hammadi library.

Lower Egypt

Bohairic

The **Bohairic** (also known as **Memphitic**) dialect originated in the western Nile Delta. The earliest Bohairic manuscripts date to the 4th century, but most texts come from the 9th century and later; this may be due to poor preservation conditions for texts in the humid regions of northern Egypt. It shows several conservative features in lexicon and phonology not found in other dialects. Bohairic is the dialect used today as the liturgical language of the Coptic Orthodox Church, replacing Sahidic some time in the eleventh century. In

contemporary liturgical use, there are two traditions of pronunciation, arising from successive reforms in the 19th and 20th centuries (see Coptic pronunciation reform). Modern revitalisation efforts are based on this dialect.

Fayyumic

Fayyumic (also written as **Faiyumic**; in older works it is often called **Bashmuri**) was spoken primarily in the Faiyum west of the Nile Valley. It is attested from the 3rd to the 10th centuries. It is most notable for writing λ (which corresponds to /l/), where other dialects generally use ϣ /r/ (probably corresponding to a flap [ɾ]). In earlier stages of Egyptian, the liquids were not distinguished in writing until the New Kingdom, when Late Egyptian became the administrative language. Late Egyptian orthography utilised a grapheme that combined the graphemes for /r/ and /n/ in order to express /l/. Demotic for its part indicated /l/ using a diacritic variety of /r/.

Oxyrhynchite

Oxyrhynchite (also known as **Mesokemic** or [confusingly] **Middle Egyptian**) is the dialect of Oxyrhynchus and surrounding areas. It shows similarities with Fayyumic and is attested in manuscripts from the fourth and fifth centuries.

See also

- British Library Coptic Language Collection
- Coptic alphabet
- Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria
- Egyptian language
- Egyptian Arabic
- Nag Hammadi library
- List of Coptic place names

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26. Allen (2020:8)
27. Peust (1999:118)
28. Allen (2020:16)
29. Peust (1999:115)
30. Peust (1999:136)
31. [ʃ] is the local equivalent of Cairene [g].
32. Lambdin 1983, p. 2.
33. Lambdin 1983, p. 39.
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External links

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 - Copticsounds – a resource for the study of Coptic phonology (<http://copticsounds.wordpress.com/>)
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 - GNU FreeFont (<http://ftp.gnu.org/gnu/freefont/>)—FreeSerif face includes a Coptic range.
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